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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001029

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY TO HOLD IT'S NATIONAL
COUNCIL IN DECEMBER

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) will elect the party's leadership, vote on amendments to the BNP constitution, and select the Central Committee at its National Council, scheduled for December 8. BNP sources expect Khaleda Zia, Leader of the Opposition and head of the BNP, to appoint her son, Tarique Rahman, to the Central Committee. Conversations with BNP leaders indicate the party plans to continue its zero-sum competition with the Awami League. The BNP appears more inclined to take to the street than engage constructively in Parliament, which it continues to boycott. End Summary.

BNP Announces National Council

2. (SBU) BNP officials confirmed, on November 1 to members of Dhaka's diplomatic corps, that the BNP would hold its National Council on December 8 in Dhaka. BNP officials stressed their party was committed to building upon Bangladesh's democratic principles centered on a multiparty system, open economy, and free press. The officials also said the BNP rejected autocracy in any form. Former Ambassador Sabihuddin Ahmed, a BNP political advisor, told Poloff that each of the 75 political districts within Bangladesh would choose 101 delegates for a total of 7,575 party delegates at the National Council. BNP officials estimated the party had seven to eight million registered members.

Selection of BNP Central Committee

3. (C) Delegates to the National Council will elect the party's leadership, vote on proposed amendments to the BNP constitution, and determine the process for selecting the BNP's Central Committee. Ahmed said he expected the delegates to allow BNP Chairman Begum Khaleda Zia, who faces no challenges to her leadership, to select some, if not all, of the Central Committee Members. Ahmed and other BNP sources expected Begum Zia would appoint her eldest son, Tarique Rahman, to the Central Committee. (Note: Rahman, who has a reputation as a corrupt thug, currently resides in London, recovering from injuries sustained while allegedly being tortured by security forces during the Caretaker Government (CTG). The Awami League-led government indicted him for corruption in August. End Note.) Ahmed acknowledged that the key factor for selection to the Central Committee would be the perceived level of loyalty to Zia and the BNP. He thought that BNP members viewed as reformist, i.e. who had

supported CTG attempts to dislodge Zia from the BNP, would face marginalization.

Give Tarique a Chance

14. (C) BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's Advisor, Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, discussed Tarique Rahman's future role in the party with A/DCM. Shamsher said that Tarique would be given some symbolic positions in the upcoming National Council meeting but told me that there were no plans for him to return at present. Shamsher volunteered that he had just returned from London, where he had spent a great deal of time with Tarique. Shamsher indicated that he would be traveling with some regularity to London to continue these discussions. According to Shamsher, the UK had opened up a dialogue with the former PM's son. Shamsher asked whether the USG would be interesting in talking to Tarique as well. The A/DCM explained that we had serious concerns about Tarique's personal corruption, the role that he and his cronies played in creating a culture of corruption, and most importantly the allegations of Tarique's links to terrorist and criminal groups. The A/DCM said that the BNP's focus should be on reorganizing the party, developing its position on national and international issues, and explaining this to domestic and foreign audiences. The A/DCM noted that while he understood that there was a strong view in favor of Tarique's return among some in the BNP, we viewed this as a mistake.

BNP Sponsored Demonstrations

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15. (C) While the BNP has not organized demonstrations against the Awami League government, a common opposition tactic in Bangladesh history, senior BNP official do not rule out the possibility of taking to the streets. "Even a cat will fight if cornered," Ahmed said.

Comment

16. (C) The BNP continues to try to find its balance following the Awami League landslide victory, but remains in disarray and unlikely to be able to mobilize huge crowds in the near future. The senior leadership continues to remain in denial over the sweeping loss the BNP suffered during the last election, which observers described as overwhelmingly free and fair. Since the election, the BNP has seldom engaged on substantive issues concerning Bangladesh. Rather than present alternative policy options, the BNP persists in opposing any Awami League initiative, regardless of its merits. The BNP will continue to capitalize on any government missteps in order to promote public dissatisfaction with the Awami League and will act quickly to move against the government if the Awami League falters. Begum Zia will likely surround herself with individuals personally loyal to her. Corruption concerns will continue, especially if Begum Zia selects BNP politicians perceived by the public and international community as corrupt. As one senior BNP official noted, "The Caretaker Government did not arrest (on corruption charges) a single innocent person." Informed observers expect little real change in the zero-sum approach to politics taken by the two main parties. Embassy Dhaka continues to urge the political parties to foster a constructive democracy that debates issues in Parliament rather than through street violence. We continue to believe that Tarique Rahman's return to prominence would be detrimental to U.S. interests and to the consolidation of democracy in Bangladesh.

MORIARTY